

GEAR UP Update

The U.S. Department of Education approved funding to the Council on Postsecondary Education for the new GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) state award in September 2005. A larger grant than the first in 2000, it allocates \$21 million over the next six years to the CPE to provide college awareness and preparation activities for middle school students.¹ GEAR UP partners across the state will provide \$21 million in matching funds for a total program support of \$42 million. This grant follows the initial 2000 GEAR UP grant awarded to the CPE, which funded a partnership of 50 middle and high schools and more than 25 postsecondary education institutions and community organizations.

GEAR UP provides services to cohorts of seventh grade students and continues this support through high school. Activities include coordinating an array of enrichment activities for students, involving families in college planning, providing supplemental scholarships, assisting schools in providing access to rigorous college preparatory curricula for all students, and providing professional development to teachers.

GEAR UP is the only initiative the CPE administers focused on middle school students and is part of an effort to prepare more Kentucky students for postsecondary education. GEAR UP supports the CPE's overall goal to increase the level of educational attainment in Kentucky to the national average by 2020.

GEAR UP Kentucky-II (2005-11): Final Selection of Schools

Fifty-two Kentucky schools² will participate in the new GEAR UP state grant. With a higher than expected demand, the CPE sought and received approval from the U.S. Department of Education to increase enrollment to 6,000 students rather than 4,500 originally planned for each year. Three groups of seventh grade students from each participating school will receive services. A new cohort of seventh graders will begin the program in each of the first three years and then receive support over the life of the grant.*

¹ The White House budget, released February 6, 2006, does not include funding for GEAR UP. The budget makes provision for funding to 2005 GEAR UP grantees to continue as model programs through FY 2007 but removes funds thereafter. Instead, the President's budget will support several new secondary school initiatives that would provide GEAR UP-type activities. If this budget is passed, the current GEAR UP grant will extend for two years instead of six.

² Six of the original schools in the 2000 grant also will participate in the new grant: Winburn and Crawford Middle Schools in Fayette County, Whitley and Leslie County Middle Schools, and Two Rivers and Holmes Junior and Senior High Schools in the Covington Independent District.

*Federal regulations require GEAR UP programs to begin working with students no later than at the seventh grade.

GEAR UP staff at the CPE, in collaboration with the Kentucky Department of Education staff,

engaged in a deliberate process to identify and select the schools for the new project. The process addressed various factors, including GEAR UP goals, state and federal requirements for achievement, and the CPE's Public Agenda for postsecondary and adult education. The selection included reviewing a substantial list of eligible schools, rating and ranking schools, and conducting meetings to gauge schools' interest and commitment to program expectations.

Eligible schools were prioritized using a weighted scale that was based on six criteria: free/reduced-priced lunch, CATS school performance accountability index, CATS student performance—percent students at proficient and distinguished level, county low socio-economic status, and county low postsecondary education attainment.

Assessing Academic Need

Each year, GEAR UP staff will analyze the results of assessments to measure student achievement. The program uses the ACT suite of assessments to measure student readiness for college. Each school must administer the EXPLORE™ in middle school, the first of three assessments to gauge student skills in mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. The assessment will be done at the seventh grade and again at the eighth grade for comparison. Additionally, students will take the PLAN™ assessment in high school so the program and schools can identify academic weaknesses, review student course taking patterns, and begin to understand what improves student achievement. Both the EXPLORE and PLAN were designed by ACT to assess whether a student is on track to achieve scores on the ACT test itself that predict college readiness.

All schools notified for selection in the program are presently administering the EXPLORE assessments to seventh grade students. The information also will be used to plan interventions for students, based on needs identified from the assessment. GEAR UP Kentucky-II, in partnership with host institutions and others, will provide technical assistance through professional development, training, and resources to its schools. The program convened its first annual Institute for a College-going Culture in early March 2006 as part of its technical assistance effort.

College Awareness

Awareness activities are an important component of all GEAR UP programs. Therefore, GEAR UP staff is developing a more comprehensive communications strategy to ensure that parents, school personnel, and the community at-large understand the importance of postsecondary education and the opportunities that are available for low-income students. A variety of formats and partnerships will be used to address hard-to-reach audiences, including weekly publication of feature topics in *The Courier Journal's* Newspaper in Education Program, a partnership with the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority to establish regional and school-based college awareness centers, and a college awareness initiative under way at the KDE.

GEAR UP Kentucky-II Host Institutions

Host institutions help the CPE conduct GEAR UP activities linked to state and national goals that are then drilled down into each local community through the lenses of the Public Agenda. Seven host institutions and principal investigators have been identified (principal investigators supervise staff in their geographic area of responsibility). They include Dan Connell, associate provost, Morehead State University; Ralph Kidd, Office of Student Affairs, Hazard Community and Technical College; John Settle, College of Education, Murray State University; Barbara Stonewater, executive director, Northern Kentucky Council of Partners; Kirsten Sundell, assistant director, Special Projects at the Nystrand Center, University of Louisville; and Linda Thomas-Glover, provost, Elizabethtown Community and Technical College.

GEAR UP Kentucky 2000: Transition to Sustainability

GEAR UP has provided an excellent framework for sustaining college-going activities. Participating schools are now linked to postsecondary institutions that can support classroom teachers and provide academic enrichment, tutoring, and mentoring for secondary school students. In particular, the partnerships involving GEAR UP have allowed postsecondary institutions to rethink how they cultivate student interest by reaching students as early as middle school.

In September 2005, the CPE received its final year of federal GEAR UP funding for the 2000 grant. Although the CPE no longer receives federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, GEAR UP Kentucky staff has continued working with schools and program partners to transition activities into more sustainable efforts within the school community. Many GEAR UP college partners have taken more active roles in providing college awareness activities for seventh and eighth grade students. In addition, the CPE is seeking funding in its new 2006-08 biennial budget to continue support of limited activities for these GEAR UP schools.

Without new external funding, GEAR UP staff will complete their work with the original 2000 schools in June 2006. At the conclusion of all activities, the CPE will report on the impact of the program over these last six years. Included in this report will be the results of exit interviews conducted by an external contractor with students, parents, and staff to gauge their impression of the impact and benefits derived from the program. The full report is expected to be available fall 2006.